Promoting Gypsy children school engagement: A story-tool project to enhance self-regulated learning

Pedro Rosário a,*, José Carlos Núñez b, Guillermo Vallejo b, Jennifer Cunha a, Raquel Azevedo a, Raquel Pereira a, Ana Rita Nunes a, Sonia Fuentes c, Tânia Moreira a

a Department of Applied Psychology, Universidade do Minho, Braga, Portugal
b Department of Psychology, Universidad de Oviedo, Oviedo, Spain
c Universidad Central de Chile, Chile

ABSTRACT

The high rate of school failure among Gypsy children is on the agenda of European policies. The current study assessed the efficacy of an extra-class program, eighteen weeks long, to promote the behavioral and cognitive engagement (self-regulated learning, SRL) of Gypsy children from fourth grade. Gypsy communities were contacted, and the 35 Gypsy children in the 4th grade (10 to 12 years old) participating in the study were randomly distributed in the experimental and control groups. The program used a story-tool to organize the weekly sessions due to the cultural value of stories and the oral transmission of values in Gypsy communities. Children’s behavioral engagement and self-regulatory behaviors in the classroom were assessed with an observation protocol. The 35 Gypsy children were observed throughout the duration of the program in 12 five-minute intervals for a total of 60 min. The findings show the efficacy of the program for promoting behavioral engagement and enhancing SRL strategies.

© 2015 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Non-attendance, school failure, and withdrawal from school at an early age are important educational problems among the Gypsy community (e.g., Baptista, 2011; Frazer & Marlier, 2011; Myers & Bhopal, 2009). The adult Gypsy population across the European Community countries presents an illiteracy rate of up to 90% (Liegeois & Gheorghie, 1995), and only 30% to 40% of Gypsy children attend school with some regularity, although even those still show high rates of absenteeism (Greenberg, 2010). Recent data from the Roma Education Fund (2010) indicates that approximately 75% of Gypsy people have not completed elementary education, presenting dropout rates that vary from 15 to 69%, depending on the country. All over Europe, different projects have been implemented to address these educational gaps (e.g., European Commission, 2014). However, more work is needed to promote Gypsy children school engagement and social inclusion (see Bingham & Okagaki, 2012).Aligned with this call, the current study assessed the efficacy of a program for promoting the school engagement of Gypsy children in the fourth grade.

1.1. Gypsy communities, social and school inclusion

The generic terms Gypsy, Traveler, or Roma describe an ethnic minority group that globally shares a set of cultural characteristics (e.g., values the family traditions that have been passed through the generations) and is or has been associated with a nomadic way of life (Bhopal, 2011; Frazer & Marlier, 2011; Kennrick & Clark, 1999; O’Hanlon & Holmes, 2004). However, we follow Mayall (2004) in acknowledging that Gypsy identities are “complex and multi-layered” (p. 12), and, therefore, generic terms such as Gypsy, Traveler, or Roma should be used carefully, as none represent all of the designated persons (Bhopal, 2011).

Recent Portuguese data on Gypsy people indicates approximately 40,000 to 60,000 Gypsies living in Portugal (ACID, 2013), a small population number when compared to populations living in countries from Central Europe. Gypsy communities living in Portugal are mainly sedentary, most of them live in deprived neighborhoods (e.g., 68.8% have no potable water in their houses, Bastos, 2003), whereas others are to be found in temporary settlements established on the outskirts of large cities, and still others were re-located in low-rent housing units as a result of the government’s integration policies.

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.cedpsych.2015.11.005
0361-476X/© 2015 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.